



## Article

### INFORMATION ETHICS IN THE DIGITAL AGE: CHALLENGES FOR INFORMATION MANAGERS IN THE DEVELOPING NATIONS

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#### **Abstract**

*The major ethical concern of the information age is unlimited access to information. The Internet has paradoxically aided and inhibited access to information. This paper discusses the danger of the digital divide. It recognizes that the information culture of Africa is predominantly oral and advocates that information be provided in various media. It recommends that the information professionals be ethically aware of the implications of the new information environment and library schools should offer courses in information ethics.*

#### **Introduction**

Accessibility issues are becoming more crucial as a social discourse with the emergence of the information society. Modern economies are judged rich or poor based on the quantity of information available and accessible to the citizenry. The Geneva World Summit on Information Society affirmed to the declarations of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), that freedom of information is a fundamental human right. In the 70's, the UNESCO championed the course of Universal Availability of Information (UAP). National libraries were mandated to build national bibliographies which eventually produced the National Union Catalogue (NUC). These are efforts to provide information for all. Distance was the core barrier of information access then. Today, with the advancement of Information Technologies, especially the Internet and the digital revolution, distance has been broken.

We now live in a globalized world. With the Internet and global networks of communication one can access global information. The critical issues of these networks

have also risen. Issues like information overload, porosity of the Internet, restriction of access- copyrights, digital divide, and others. Capurro, (2000) notes:

*that the core questions of information ethics in this new century' are the growth, speed, and the complexity of this system and its impact on the everyday lives of millions of people along with the dangers of a digital divide.*

Information ethics seeks to address these critical issues. In the paper, culture, information ethics addressed issues like copyrights, freedom of information, privacy and confidentiality and scarcity of information. In today's digital culture, and globalized world, information ethics has become more complex. Capurro advocates for intercultural information ethics that will merge national jurisdictions in handling copyrights issues and the like. Information ethics has evolved through three traditions. Capurro terms it information ethics paradigms, from oral age which dealt with freedom of speech in ancient Greece, through the modernity's freedom of the press or information to the digital age with its focus on freedom of access. The Western tradition of information ethics has evolved alongside the Greece traditions while the African tradition of information ethics is basically oral even with the advancement of ICT. The African information ethical challenges of the digital age center on the digital divide which has occurred because of the inequality in the access to education between the elite and poor, between the rural area and the city, electricity supply, expensive and poor bandwidths of the Internet services, etc. This portends greater challenges for African information ethics and that of other developing countries.

### **The Concept of Information Ethics**

The VF - INFOethics, a UNESCO Forum conceptualizes information ethics as:

*the study of commonly held values related to the belief in equality of access, justice and mutual respect arising from the development and application of new information and telecommunications technologies (e.g. the Internet).*

*Information ethics concerns many fields such as philosophy (ethics), anthropology/ethnology, linguistics, economics, law, sociology, political science, education, religion/theology, artificial intelligence, information and computer science. Information ethics covers both the private/individual and the public/institutional aspects of ethical problems, more and more on a global basis (<http://www.net/ethics/de/archive>).*

Information ethics is an art and science that seeks to bring sensitivity and method to the discernment of moral, values (School of Information Science, 2007). Information ethics therefore develops criticisms of moral attitudes and traditions in the information field at

an individual and collective level. The Western tradition of information ethics from ancient Greece until the beginning of the 20th century is characterized by two ideas:

- Freedom of speech,
- Freedom of printed works and particularly freedom of the press.

A third element arises now, in the age of a networked world of electronic information, namely

- Freedom of access / right to communicate (Capurro, 2000; 2001: ICIE, 2006).

The African traditions of information ethics still remain oral even with the advancement of ICT. It has been observed that information revolution is occurring against a legacy of information-poverty. Many people in West Africa do not know how to read and remain part of an oral culture.

Watts and Ibegbule (2006) report a study in Nigeria that revealed 0.3 percent of the population using the Internet as compared to 54 percent in the United States. They cited another study on Nigerian libraries which revealed high cost of hardware, software and ISPs as significant barriers to provision of electronic information resources. These studies reiterate the fact that a huge gap exists between those who have access to information and those who do not have. This is against the Geneva Declaration Principles that:

*'... everyone everywhere should have the opportunity to participate and no one should be excluded from the benefits the information Society offers' World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).*

Information ethics provides a framework for rationalizing free access to information for all people.

### **The Importance of Information Ethics**

The basis for ethical thinking on the responsibility of information professionals are founded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948). At The School of Information Sciences (SIS), the goal of the information ethics course is to "Provide a framework that will help to prepare and guide information professionals as they encounter and respond to ethical challenges". According to International Centre for Information Ethics (ICIE), the information ethics educational goals for information specialists are:

- To be able to recognize and articulate ethical conflicts in the information field, to activate the sense of responsibility with regard to the consequences of individual and collective interactions in the information field,

- To improve the qualification for intercultural dialogue on the basis of the recognition of different kinds of information cultures and values,
- To provide basic knowledge about ethical theories and concepts and about their relevance in everyday information work (ICIE, 2006).

In this age of digital information and communication networks, information ethics goals should be extended from the biosphere to the infosphere, to sensitize humanity to the new ethical needs of intangible, intellectual environments, and to indicate how the digital divide (DD) can be bridged (Floridi 2002). Our challenge is to collaborate to develop a coherent and robust environmental information ethics for the future of humanity.

### **Information Ethical Imperatives in the Digital Age**

Information ethics as a social discourse does not claim to provide all the answers to the ethical conflicts of the digital revolution, but aim at sensitizing people on issues as: globalization, privacy and confidentiality, content regulation, and universal access (Capurro, 2001).

At UNESCO Virtual Forum for INFOethics the following recommendations were made:

- Bring net access to poor countries by putting existing resources to sensible use in order to promote the development of global and local information cultures and economies.
- Support the development of a World Information Ethos.
- Support concrete projects in information poor countries in order to create country-specific information centers.
- Promote public awareness on these matters through virtual forums, publications, and conferences.
- Provide permanent, specific, and detailed knowledge of existing information activities in information poor countries.
- UNESCO should promote the rights of non-English-speaking-countries and their economic interests.
- UNESCO should promote topics in information ethics to be included in curricula at all levels.
- Promotion activities through international organizations should be based on grassroots efforts as well as on a decentralized and well- coordinated basis.

(<http://Mww.de3.emb.net/infoethics/>)

Luciano, (2002), identified the Digital Divide (DD) as the source of most of the ethical problems emerging from the evolution of the information society. According to him the DD disempowers, discriminates, and generates dependency. It can engender new forms of colonialism and apartheid that must be prevented; opposed and ultimately eradicated. The task is to formulate an information ethics that can treat the world of data, information, knowledge and communication as a new environment: the infosphere. Information ethics must be able to solve the new ethical challenges arising in the new environment on the basis of the fundamental principles of respect for information, its conservation and valorization. It must be the environmental ethics for the information environment. Digital technology and the Internet allow rapid transmission of information and instant communication among individuals, nations and the whole world. While convenient, the incessant access to enormous information paradoxically poses both strengths and weaknesses to information use. To ethically influence the issues challenging the freedom of access to information, sensitization on the core solutions to the Digital Divide are required. Some of the solutions are discussed below.

### **Digitization**

Digitization is a technical process of creating digital information. The two major types of digital information are electronic and 'born digital' information. Electronic information are information sources that have been published in the print form and then copied into the digital form while the born digital information are originally created and published in the digital media. Digital revolution has provided the platform for information accessibility. Without digitization access to large networked information would not be possible. Digitization is a big project usually undertaken by institutions and national libraries. Germain (2007), observes some activities of the larger commercial projects focusing on U.S. the Supreme Court Records and Briefs, 1832-1978 and Making of Modern Law. Also, Cornell Law Library is digitizing its "large historical collection (U.S. and British) in collaboration with the Hein Publishing Company." The Google Book Project is inspired by Google's philosophy, "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful ([www.books.aoqle.com](http://www.books.aoqle.com))". The World Digital Library is another project which was launched in December, 2006. It will make "available on the Internet free of charge and in multilingual format, significant primary materials from cultures around the world". In Nigeria, the Digital Pilot Project was set up on 23rd May, 2005. Eleven of the National Dailies from

December, 2004 have been digitized and have been made available in CD- ROM for sale (Odogwu, 2006).

Pinfield (2001), notes that electronic resources are not only acquired by libraries, but are also created by them. Libraries are increasingly active in digitizing materials to preserve the originals and also to add value to them. Information professionals especially those in the developing countries should be involved in creating local content. This will go a long way in curbing the digital divide. John-Okeke, (2003) comments that African countries have suffered from dearth of materials containing indigenous knowledge; and that digital revolution has offered them the opportunity to convert some of their rare collections into the digital format and then showcase them to the global market. Librarians in the developing countries should be concerned about the danger of the digital divide and should work hard to contribute resources to the global information pool. We might want to ask, how do we do that? The answer will be through creating digital libraries. We need to build institutional repositories where the content would be made visible globally. In providing solution to the issue of digital divide, efforts should be made to provide information to rural dwellers. This people are highly illiterate. To this end they should be provided with information in the media they can decipher. It has been noted that Africa information environment is largely oral. Our information ethics paradigm will reflect a mixture of modern technologies and strategies that will cater for both literate and illiterate communities.

### **Oral Transmission of Information**

This could take the form of group discussions, person-to-person transmissions. Oral transmissions play a very important role in many non- literate societies and should therefore be harnessed for the biggest effect. Extension information managers use oral transmission a lot to make sure information gets to the grassroots. Researches on information needs of the rural dwellers have shown that their sources of information are mainly through political leaders, community leaders, and cooperative societies. Adebowale, (1998) reveals the sources of information for people in local Government areas in Lagos State as town criers, cooperative societies, peer groups, churches/mosques, professional meetings and government information department. Libraries can use oral medium to attract users to the libraries. The public libraries should also embark on community information services as a means of eradicating, alienation and deprivation in African society. Every community has a peculiar information need. In Enugu, the Library Board's first mobile library started in 1958 as

part of UNESCO Pilot Projects in Africa, library resources were taken to miles away in remote areas, schools, hospitals, prisons and local governments (Ude, 2006). The camel library in Kenya is also a good practice. Udejah, (2008) reports that University of Nigeria, Nsukka published newspapers in Nigeria's three main languages, the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa to convey special information especially in the areas of healthcare and agriculture in such a way as they would be readily accessible to the grassroots noting that 70% of the population dwells in the rural areas.

### **Codes of Ethics**

Professional codes of ethics are universally accepted culture and traditions which serve as guide to conducts and behaviours of its members. The librarianship profession is based on the principle of service to the public. The basic tenet of the information profession is to enable access to information in any format and location. The United Kingdom Library Association Code states that the prime duty of a professional librarians is to enable access to information to meet the needs of the user irrespective of the librarians personal interests or views of on the contents of the information required Bowden, (1994). The five laws of Librarianship made it clear that a user must be satisfied with its needs. We have successfully handled copyright issues in the print word, balancing both the interest of copyright holders and users. The question today will be how to manage the new information environment where publishers and authors and the online vendors use all source of restrictions to prevent none subscribers from accessing information? In the print culture, the principle of fair- dealings solved copyright problems. The complexity of the Internet makes the fair-dealing provisions difficult.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges of the digital age are enormous but not insurmountable. We are expected as information professionals to maintain professional ethics both individually and collectively. Our social responsibility in this digital age is to fight against any form of restriction to information. We had fought censorship and obtained fair deal or fair use in the print world. The major ethical question is how to control the Internet. Another serious consideration is how to be ethically alert to providing information to both the privileged and under-privileged living in the same information environment. Academic and research libraries should build Institutional repositories. This will help in overcoming the problems of scarcity of local content by digitizing theses and

dissertations, rare books, orphaned books and research results; and provide access to them through the Internet.

Liberians in the developing countries need to do a lot to curb the digital divide (DD). National libraries in the developing countries should emulate the activities of the developed countries in taking up digitization projects. This is the only way that local content can be made global. The National Library of Nigeria has embarked on digitization of the nation's daily newspapers. This is a good start but efforts should be made towards providing access to the database through the Internet.

Provision of technological infrastructure such as computers, scanners, digital cameras, Internet connectivity, etc. will speed up information access. Lack of skill manpower poses a serious setback in the provision of electronic information. Library schools should evaluate their course contents to fit into global expectations of information professionals. This is very essential at this time. Librarians must know how to behave so that they do not offend copyright laws and at the same time do not violate people's right to information. National associations should also be committed in pursuing information ethics. The government has a part to play through policy formations. Formulating and implementing policies especially ICT policies are needed to consistently provide information for all.

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